

Gerry Jeffers

CONVERSATIONS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING: A CHALLENGE FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Gerry Jeffers is a lecturer in the Education Department, National University of Ireland, Maynooth with a particular brief for 'Innovation and Development in Schools.' Prior to joining the Department, he was National Co-ordinator of the Transition Year Curriculum Support Service. He has taught in VEC schools in Dublin and Kilkenny and worked as a guidance counsellor and deputy principal. He also taught in Kenya, East Africa.

This paper is based on a presentation made at the first workshop for Principals and Deputy Principals taking part in the Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century project (TL21), Education Department, NUI Maynooth, 26 February 2004. TL21 is a four-year joint research and development project between the university department and sixteen schools with the aims of developing existing good practice and promoting fresh thinking and action about teaching and learning processes. Further details are available at the project's website www.nuim.ie/TL21.

ABSTRACT: This paper presents the view that schools should be learning communities characterised by cultures that value shared reflection and that promote and nurture professional conversations. Based on evidence from the author's own professional experiences and other sources, the challenges for school leaders to keep teaching and learning high on their list of priorities are explored. School principals and deputy principals are seen not only as supporters and facilitators of meaningful and relevant professional conversations among school staff members but are encouraged to be active leaders of such conversations, not least among themselves. Some rethinking about the role of school leaders is proposed and some practical suggestions offered. The discussion is located in the context of TL21, a school-university partnership project that aims to strengthen schools as active learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

If a focus on teaching and learning is at the heart of school improvement, then it seems reasonable that such a focus should be a central feature of the daily work of principals and deputy principals. There is considerable evidence that, despite their best intentions, principals are continually deflected from this focus, frequently because of the multiple pressures and demands that arise from the immediacy of school life. Furthermore, even when teaching and learning are given a high priority, for example in the context of School Development Planning, the evidence suggests that legal and operational issues take precedence. (SDPI, 2002)

In his aptly titled *Schools Must Speak for Themselves*, John Macbeath (1999) contends that self-evaluation is the route to school improvement. This title succinctly captures three distinct imperatives for today's schools: greater 'ownership' of their work by those employed in schools, an increased sense of accountability to stakeholders and the need to manage their public relations. Macbeath's work is based on a recognition that each school has its own unique history, cast of characters, and narrative that unfolds over time, sometimes in unanticipated directions. Those who work in positions of school leadership are keenly aware that there are various audiences out there judging their schools, often working with limited data. School personnel know that if they don't speak up for their schools, few others are likely to do so.

The view proposed in this paper is that, in order to reach a readiness for telling their own stories self-confidently and self-critically, schools must, to rephrase Macbeath, speak *to* themselves. It is based on a belief that effective schools should be learning communities characterised by cultures that value shared reflection and that promote and nurture professional conversations. Furthermore, it is proposed that school leaders should lead by example, ensuring that improving the quality of teaching and learning is a central feature of such conversations. The perspective offered here has been forged on anvils of experience, as teacher, as school leader, as member of an educational support service, and more recently, as a staff member within a university education department.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Following his appointment to the post of a vice-principal (nowadays Deputy Principal) this author learned a vivid and sobering lesson. At that time, the school, a new community college in a Dublin suburb, was only two years old with an enrolment of 320 students and twenty-three teachers. As a team, the school staff was very much at the stage of 'inventing' a school and, indeed, the invention was accompanied by many professional conversations. For example, a cursory analysis of end-of-term test results and of reports that were sent home to parents prompted some concerns. These centred around that occupational dilemma of, on the one hand, maintaining standards, while, on the other, not discouraging students. In

particular, the question arose 'why do so many students seem to have achieved relatively low grades? In reviewing the exam papers it emerged that, among other things, seven different subject areas posed questions related to 'measurement' - Mathematics, Science, Geography, Woodwork, Home Economics, Metalwork and Mechanical Drawing, to give the subjects their historically correct titles. Teachers confirmed that some students were struggling with the basics of measurement. The possibility that attempting to teach measurement in seven different ways might be confusing for some students was acknowledged. However, the apparently obvious next step – that of devising a module on measurement to be taught early in first year with the aim of consolidating students' basic understandings of distance, area and volume – met with strong resistance. This enthusiastic Vice-Principal learned an important lesson.

Teachers were less than impressed by the proposed cross-curricular, interdisciplinary module. Two particular perspectives are worth recalling from the conversations related to this topic. Firstly, teachers can be fiercely territorial about their own subjects. 'No, we do it in a special way in Geography/Metalwork/ Home Economics.' Secondly, there was an even more fundamental undercurrent to their responses. The essential message, delivered with various levels of directness, could be decoded as: 'Who do you think you are as Vice-Principal, sticking your nose into my subject area? Do you not know that your job is to make sure there is a teacher in every class and that misbehaving students are dealt with?'

And so, with a metaphorical bloodied nose, this particular school leader retreated and reflected. So what was this job as a Vice-Principal, he asked himself? If teaching and learning are the central activities of the school, then surely supporting teaching and learning has to be a central concern for anyone interested in aspiring to effective school leadership? This individual had crashed into a cluster of questions with which everyone involved in school leadership must engage. In particular, there is the clear difference in expertise in relation to subject areas; often, the individual teacher is an undisputed specialist while the school leader may only have a cursory knowledge of the subject; the power differential favours the individual teacher. How should the school leader react when he or she feels intimidated by his or her ignorance in particular subject areas, especially if the effect is to increase the distance between school leader and classroom practice?

Faced with these dilemmas, this leader decided that he needed to develop a greater familiarity with a wide range of school subjects. Syllabi and examiners' reports were read but some of the most useful - and interesting - parts of that learning journey involved listening to teachers talking about their subjects, engaging with them in professional conversations. Given the right circumstances, the majority of teachers were not only happy to talk about their teaching but frequently articulated strong commitment and passion for their subjects. Hearing individuals talk about their hopes and aspirations for their students and classes was most instructive for the recently appointed school leader. Of course, some of these conversations arose out of minor crises: students misbehaving, classes under-performing, teachers experiencing frustration and so forth.

On reflection, it seems that increased insight and empathy are more likely to result from such conversations when at least three school-related realities are recognized:

1. There is genuine *respect* for the fact that individual subject teachers are 'experts', with particular knowledge and insights that a school leader may not have. As school leaders gain more confidence in such conversations, acknowledging their own ignorance should become less difficult! To initiate such conversations, school leaders may have to take the lead. Such conversations often approach what Friere refers to as 'true dialogue', where 'dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence'. (Friere, 1970, p 72)
2. Quite often the school leader's role in these conversations may be primarily one of *listening* to what teachers have to say, clarifying for understanding in a way that reinforces the first point.
3. Because of the nature of school life, conversations are often 'bitty' and interrupted. From a school leader's viewpoint, valuing brief conversations on the corridor, in the staffroom and elsewhere as *part of a wider, ongoing professional conversation* can be useful. For example, informal enquiries to a teacher in the staffroom asking about progress following an incident that weeks ago seemed to be intensely urgent can be very effective in facilitating a calmer professional discussion about the issue.

Barth's (1990, p. 46) contention that 'the most crucial role of the principal is as head learner experiencing, displaying, modelling and celebrating what it is hoped and expected that teachers and pupils will do' is a useful perspective in this regard.

For this leader, these experiences early in his newfound role were formative lessons. He grew to appreciate more the double-edged 'autonomy-isolation' tension with which all teachers struggle; to acknowledge that one teacher's autonomy can be another's isolation; to realise that, while individual teachers may wish to be autonomous in many situations, there are other times when collegiality, a sense of solidarity and a lack of isolation are important. Indeed, this tension can be seen as one of the defining characteristics of the teaching profession. Yet, as Lortie (1975) and many others have asserted, teachers say that they learn best from other teachers. So, another question looms: in promoting teachers' professional development how can school leaders best promote autonomy while at the same time counteract isolation?

TEAMWORK

If school leaders must be chief learners, leading by example, then they must also be active in promoting teamwork. In particular, teamwork in schools needs to be directed towards facilitating teachers sharing their practice with each other. Examples of teacher solidarity abound, and are often very evident in staffrooms. It is especially visible when an individual teacher arrives in after a particular class or incident and is clearly upset, disappointed, frustrated, angry, or indeed, all of the above. Colleagues rally round offering words of empathy and support. In such critical moments, one often hears the forceful articulation of key shared values, sometimes about students, sometimes about the job of being a teacher, sometimes about the leadership within the school, sometimes even about the frustration of being human. Negatives are often mixed with positives. Partly because of the ways schools are organized, much of this sharing of perspectives on the role of the teacher takes place informally. Teachers identify like-minded colleagues and school sub-cultures develop. A challenge for school leadership is to harness existing collegial relationships and at the same time encourage new ones directed at supporting the school's needs. Formal teams within schools can be grouped into three main categories:

- Subject focused teams, e.g. English, Modern Languages, Civic, Social and Political Education etc.
- Pastoral teams e.g. Anti-bullying; Year head and class tutors, Bereavement support, etc.
- Special task focused teams e.g. discipline, the Christmas Concert, Sports Day etc.

When teams work well, whether their focus is in a subject area, in the pastoral arena or related to a specific school project, they are nourished by professional conversations. With such teamwork, we begin to glimpse the validity of Sergiovanni's (1996) contention that shifting the thinking about the school from that of an 'organisation' to 'a community' changes how we think schools should be structured. As he says:

Communities are organised around relationships and ideas. They create structures that bond people together in a one-ness, and that bind them to a set of shared values and ideas.

(Sergiovanni, 1996, p 46)

Mc Dermott, echoing Habermas, captures some of the attraction of team-working for teachers when he observes,

I have always been attracted to the idea of team, and the collegiality it implies. My ideal of team is of a professional space, where the

participants feel safe; where respect is reciprocated; where communication is open and questioning; where work-related emotions are not experienced as destructive; and where each individual has an opportunity to flourish and to inspire. This ideal is one which, I believe, can influence, in a powerful way, the reality of team-formation in the everyday circumstances of school life.

(McDermott 2004, p.65)

TEACHING AND LEARNING 21

Strengthening and affirming schools as active learning communities is a major goal of TL21. This project aims to increase teachers' capacities as authors of their own work and to encourage students to become more active and responsible participants in their own learning. Professional conversations are critically important in realizing these aims. At the individual teacher level, regular conversations with a colleague, 'a critical friend', about one's own classroom work is an essential component. Subject focused workshops involving teachers from clusters of neighbouring schools will be driven by the power of teachers talking to each other about their work. The team sees a similar process operating at the leadership level, with principals and deputy principals dedicating time and space within busy schedules to talk to each other about relevant teaching and learning issues within their schools. Workshops with school leaders from participating schools provide further structured opportunities to explore such issues. Furthermore, those of us working on the university side of this partnership see TL21 as an ongoing conversation between schools and project team members. The belief is that , by engaging in greater collegiality, teachers are more likely to enhance their capacity for autonomy, and become more confident and competent about their own work. TL21's ambition is also that by rooting itself initially in four subject areas¹, the energy, enthusiasm and practical insights from the work will spread throughout the school community, particularly by fostering greater conversation, discussion and debate on key teaching and learning issues.

It is worth emphasizing that school leaders are both expected to facilitate this process among teachers, and, critically, to engage actively in conversations about teaching and learning themselves. Indeed, the TL21 project team expects that improved quality and frequency of conversations about teaching and learning between principals and deputies is likely to become both an outcome of the project, and an important indicator of its impact in individual schools. The intention is that some of the thinking and strategies outlined in this paper will contribute to this.

¹ The initial subjects in TL21 are English, Mathematics, Gaelige and Science. There is also a cross-curricular ICT strand.

THE PASTORAL AND THE SUBJECT FOCUS

A casual conversation with a friend, returning to Ireland after spending nearly twenty years teaching in mainland Europe, helped illuminate a further aspect of the teaching and learning challenge for school leaders. Asked what changes he observed in schools, he didn't hesitate. 'The shift towards pastoral care', he replied. This resonated with the experience, referred to earlier, of 'inventing' a school during the 1980s. Consciously and deliberately the post of responsibility system was structured around year-heads and class tutors, each with a job description that was strongly pastoral. As the conversation developed the flip-side of the friend's response was explored: with such an emphatic swing towards the pastoral, what might have lost out? 'Subject departments', he replied, without hesitation.

That conversation brought into sharp focus a central question related to school organisation: when a school consciously deploys its formal posts of responsibility in developing a pastoral system - effective year-heads and tutors - how can subject departments be nurtured? If the posts are insufficient to ensure a head in every department are there not senior positions to do with curriculum, staff development, teaching and learning and subject leadership that need to be put in place? This question is in no way intended to negate the much needed pastoral emphasis evident in many schools, but the question is increasingly relevant, especially at a time of major curricular and syllabi changes.

A minor incident serves to illustrate what can happen when a school's subject department structure is weak. During the course of a day-long staff meeting in the school mentioned previously, subject specific meetings were scheduled. In order to facilitate more than seventy teachers it was usually necessary to arrange three different combinations of subject meetings, each lasting thirty minutes. This was a major investment of staff time. The returns often appeared uneven, none more so than the meeting that lasted barely five minutes! 'We've decided the books for next year', the school leader was informed when he enquired what had happened, as if that was all those particular subject teachers had to talk about. However, rather than blame the participants, this school leadership team agreed that unstructured meetings were unlikely to be effective, that instructing a subject departments to 'have a meeting' is rarely sufficient. Eventually a list of suggested activities for subject meetings emerged, directed towards getting teachers to talk about their practice. To be meaningful, subject meetings need preparation, facilitation –preferably by someone willing and prepared - and a framework to promote professional conversations. Talking to subject-convenors or department heads, individually and collectively, about developing their role may be among the most important conversations in which principals and deputies need to engage.

KEY CONVERSATIONS

While it is important to encourage professional conversations among teachers and between teachers and school leaders in order to promote a culture that puts teaching and learning at the heart of school leaders' roles, the quality of the conversations between Principals and Deputy Principals is also vitally important. Frequently the busy nature of the school day appears to make it next to impossible for these school leaders to find time to discuss teaching and learning. Something else always seems more pressing. And yet, if these conversations are not taking place, 'teaching and learning' can easily slip down the priority list.

In the school mentioned earlier both Principal and Deputy valued strongly the power of such conversations. The most vivid manifestation of these beliefs came each summer when the important work of drawing up the coming year's timetables were interspersed with extensive, sometimes structured, sometimes non-linear, conversations about the school and about teaching and learning. In terms of monitoring staff development, one of the key questions was: if teacher X is experiencing real difficulties in his/her classroom, who on the staff is he/she likely to approach for support? This exercise involved inserting each teacher's name at 'X'. Often networks of supports, sometimes involving subject departments or tutor and year-head teams or friendship groups could be identified. Informal mentoring was widespread. Anyone who appeared particularly isolated became a priority for conversational support, either from the school leadership – though one has to acknowledge frequently that was least likely -, or, preferably, a subject leader. Of course, there was resistance. But there were also significant breakthroughs. As time went on it became clear that the informal pairing of teachers was often more powerful than full subject teams. School leaders, it seems, need to facilitate and support both.

These summer conversations between the Principal and Deputy were built around a particularly useful structure. This entailed a formal, individual consultation with all teachers. These conversations took place from March onwards and focused on teachers' timetables for the following year. Prior to a face-to-face meeting, each teacher filled in a simple form. The form sought information from teachers as follows:

1. What classes are you currently teaching and how well or otherwise are they going?
2. What classes/subjects would you wish to teach next year?

While this process emphasized the language of consultation, it was clear that the ultimate value was to devise a viable timetable that would operate in the first week of September and beyond. This mechanism ensured that, at least once a year, every teacher had a formal conversation with either Principal or Deputy Principal about his or her teaching.

On occasions when this practice is recounted, teachers react with surprise. Responses such as: *Do you know that in twenty years teaching, my principal never sat me down in a formal way and asked me about my teaching* are common. Others agree and then, usually, someone else comes up with the reasonable point: but that's like inspection? This sparks further lively debate! One is left with a sobering question: if Principals and Deputy Principals are not engaged in extended conversations with teachers about their teaching, why not?

FUTURE TRENDS

The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) has given a fresh clarity to the respective roles of school leaders, teachers and to the Inspectorate. Undoubtedly, in the future, professional conversations between teachers and inspectors are going to play a greater part in teachers' professional development than has been our tradition. The chances of teachers having worthwhile professional conversations with inspectors are more likely if such conversations are already taking place within schools, among the teaching team. This takes us back to the centrality of schools speaking to themselves. It also links neatly with some of Donald Schon's ideas about reflective practitioners and Peter Senge's vision of learning organizations.

There are two further, brief, points worth making about Principals and Deputy Principals working together. Firstly, school leaders' views about teaching and learning find concrete expression in a school's timetable. The timetable is an unequivocal statement about how particular students, teachers, programmes and subjects are valued. Debates about mixed-ability, multiple intelligences, inclusive schools, streaming, tracking, curricular breadth and balance, subject choices, hierarchies and teamwork are settled, at least for the coming year, in the annual timetable. Ideally, school leaders should be able to offer educationally defensible explanations to every detail of a school's timetable 'Blaming' a computer programme or hiding behind some other excuse seems like abdication of responsibility.

Secondly, not only is the quality of the relationship between principal and a deputy of crucial importance for an effective school, the participants, as in all relationships, need to work at nurturing that relationship. Sometimes the pair in the relationship may have little prior history of working together. In this author's case, he met the principal - with whom he was going to work side by side for the next eleven years - for the first time on the day of the interview for the position of deputy. The principal wasn't a member of the interview board but was pacing up and down welcoming candidates and muttering about arranged marriages. The metaphor of 'arranged marriage' is one to which all principals and deputies can relate!

In working together to forge a professional relationship, both worked hard at developing a shared vision for the kind of school they wished to construct. At a

more basic level, the principal and deputy tried to ensure that there weren't too many chinks in the joint presentation of leadership to staff. Both were keenly aware that there were teachers, students and parents, who, for whatever reasons, would be only too happy to exploit any perceived tensions between them. That situation can be especially difficult for the deputy who's often the one who ends up biting his or her tongue. This points towards another question: how can a principal and deputy best operate a professional relationship that respects different viewpoints but is also collaborative in the best interests of students' learning? Here again, much of the answer is worked out in ongoing professional conversations between principal and deputy. Put another way, in the goldfish bowl that is a school, if principal and deputy are not engaged in meaningful professional dialogue with each other, what messages does this send to teachers, students and other stakeholders? Indeed, how principal and deputy deal with their differences - in viewpoints, values and styles - is a critical feature of any school's development. For example, one suspects that, in some schools, the resolution of certain difficulties could begin with the principal and deputy starting to talk to each other about such differences.

IMMEDIACY

With the value of hindsight, it is easier now to see how the process of trying to engage with teaching and learning, attempting to be a curriculum leader, is often a story of limited success. Time is a key issue; there never seems to be enough. In a culture where the metaphorical fire brigade dimension of a school leader's role is often seen as critically important, strategic planning can seem like a luxury. So often, something that appears more urgent demands attention. Broken windows, broken hearts and broken bones are all more immediately engaging when compared to reflection on teaching and learning.

This former school leader has to admit that he found the 'buzz' of the 'immediate' engaging, invigorating and at times even mildly addictive! For some, there can be a seductive attractiveness in being seen as central to the effective operation of a school. Because schools are such immediate places, the need for 'troubleshooting', for practical responses to all manner of minor crises, are very real. People with the label 'principal' attached are often perceived as those who should deal with all these issues. Making time and space for teaching and learning will always involve a struggle. Working out a balance between dealing with the day-to-day routines of school life and the more reflective, strategic aspects of leadership will always be challenging. A decade ago, in one of the few published studies of Irish school leaders, Leader and Boldt (1994, p.95) observed that 'the unmistakable evidence from the diaries, the interviews and the case studies' was that principals generally involved themselves 'directly with low value tasks. Many of these tasks are maintenance and janitorial in character'. How much has changed since 1994?

The 2002 Report from the School Development Planning Initiative noted, in a telling observation, that

.... although issues relating to teaching and learning have been prioritised by a significant proportion of Post-Primary schools, they have tended to be overshadowed in the SDP process by legal and organisational concerns.

(SDPI, 2002, p.51)

In this context, Hargreaves (1994) offers some illuminating frameworks on how teachers understand 'time' in the context of school. Indeed, his perspectives on teachers' work and culture in the postmodern age are worthy of serious consideration by those in school leadership positions.

Thus, experience suggests that it will be a constant struggle to keep teaching and learning centre stage within school life. And this points to the formulation of another set of key questions that often arises in conversations about teaching and learning. For example, what do changes in teaching and learning practices actually look like? Should principals and deputies have a list of indicators of change in teaching and learning? If so, what would be on such a list? How good are we at recognizing the signs of really productive teaching and learning?

Each school leadership team could profitably work on its own set of responses to these questions, identifying its own preferred issues and targets. Sometimes, indicators can be minor ones that take on a symbolic significance. A small example illustrates this point. This particular deputy principal used to teach eight hours per week, much of it in the same classroom. He regularly tried to re-shape the learning space, often arranging the desks in a rectangle rather than in the traditional rows, with a view to increasing student participation and co-operative learning. Often, on returning to the room, he observed that other teachers had reverted to serried rows. However, on other occasions he could see that some colleagues also preferred the changed learning space. The struggle for change in school practices is worked out frequently through such minor skirmishes as well as through broad policy shifts.

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SCHOOL GOALS

As already mentioned, the 1998 Education Act brings the need for more professional conversations within school to the forefront of educational planning within schools. Traditionally, policy directions in Irish education have evolved haphazardly and have often been characterized by a certain vagueness (see, for example, OECD 1991; Coolahan 1994; Cromien 2000; Gleeson, 2004). The 1998 Education Act marks an important shift towards more formal descriptions of roles and responsibilities. The contention here is that much of the underlying thrusts within the Act support the need for schools to engage more in professional conversations focused on teaching and learning.

For example, one of the objects of the Education Act, 1998 is: 'To promote best practice in teaching methods with regard to the diverse needs of students and the development of the skills and competences of teachers (Section 6 f), while one of the central functions of a school is to 'Meet the educational needs of all students' (9 a).

A further function is to:

Establish and maintain systems whereby the efficiency and effectiveness of its operations can be assessed, including the quality and effectiveness of teaching in the school and the attainment levels and academic standards of the students (9 k).

Building on the general responsibilities of schools, the Act becomes more explicit when it sets out the responsibilities of the Principal and teaching staff.

The job of the Principal and the teachers is to encourage learning in students (22a).

Furthermore, a vision of school leaders' collaborating with others towards a collegial culture that supports teaching and learning is also quite explicit in the Act. For example, one of the tasks of the Principal is to

Be responsible for the creation, together with the board, parents of students and the teachers, of a school environment which is supportive of learning among the students and which promotes the professional development of the teachers (23c).

Whatever was possible in the past, it seems that our new educational context will mean that it will be vital for principals and deputies to be engaged in ongoing meaningful conversation with each other, especially about the professional growth of the teachers in that school. Realistically, this in turn requires extensive conversations by both principal and deputy with those teachers.

TRANSITION YEAR SUPPORT

While much of the perspective being proposed here was developed through the experience of working as a deputy principal over eleven years, subsequent work has tended to reinforce such views. Two examples are illustrative.

Membership of the Support Service for Transition Year during the mid and late 1990s involved working with a wide variety of school staffs. Unlike other school programmes curriculum content in Transition Year (TY) 'is a matter for selection and adaptation by the individual school' (Department of Education, 1993, p.5). This presents school staffs with opportunities to be innovative. One of the

striking features observed while working with many staffs was their limited belief in themselves, their lack of professional self-respect. They seemed to put more faith in external ‘experts’ than in their own expertise. This tended to come into sharp relief when the Support Service emphasised that the greatest expertise to devise an imaginative TY programme, in line with their particular students’ needs, resided within the school: what teachers needed to do was to talk to each other. It was quite a common observation of many members of that team, especially in the first stage of support, that such suggestions were met by seas of disbelieving faces. Collective professional self-belief was low. Indeed, for school leaders there are unique opportunities around TY to respond to teachers’ basic needs for recognition and affirmation.

These experiences in schools, including many conversations with principals and TY co-ordinators, continually brought into focus another central question that faces school leaders: how can the undoubted expertise about teaching and learning that resides in each staff, be shared among all who work in any given school? This challenge is well illustrated by a conundrum that most school leaders have encountered, that of the two adjacent classrooms. The conundrum is this: Room 13 appears to be a classroom in which wonderful educational experiences occur regularly; next door, Room 14, however, appears to approach chaos; what interventions can school leaders make to ensure that some of the professional expertise evident in Room 13 is shared with the teacher who seems to be struggling in Room 14? Once again, while not wanting to imply that there are simple answers to these dilemmas, the proposition is that professional conversations can make a critical difference.

TEACHER SUPPORT PROJECT

The final example relating to professional conversations arises from facilitating a recent teacher support project, different from TL21, but with some similar orientations. Ten volunteers in a suburban post-primary school agreed to work in pairs. They observed each others’ classes and then conversed with each other about the experiences. Then, every six weeks or so, the ten volunteer teachers, the principal or deputy and the external facilitator came together to talk about the experiences. These were powerfully rich conversations. One particular insight seems especially relevant here. A participant commented that for her, the main value of the project was:

I like the fact that we are talking about teaching in a non-crisis situation. So often we talk to each other about teaching after a dreadful class, letting off steam but not (in a) very reflective (way).

That observation helps formulate another useful question for school leaders: how can conversations be promoted between teachers that encourage their talking about teaching in non-crisis situations? Part of any answer will be 'time', but allocating time alone seems unlikely to bring about such conversations. Structure, facilitation and a climate of trust are also essential.

CONCLUSION

The intention has been to highlight the centrality of teaching and learning in the work of any school and to illustrate with some examples from the author's professional experience, how, in practice, this can be challenging. For those in positions of school leadership, keeping teaching and learning close to the top of one's priorities can be a continual struggle. Our profession's collective understanding of the school as a workplace is often characterized by an emphasis on professional autonomy; the emphasis here is that this needs to be counterbalanced by a genuine collegiality that is characterized by professional conversations. Paradoxically, increased collaboration among teachers can promote greater individual autonomy. We may grapple to find a common vocabulary to talk to each other about teaching and learning but the alternative - isolated individual teachers who rarely converse with each other about what really matters in schools - is a recipe for sterile professional relationships, frustrating work environments and, ultimately, poorer student learning. As Libermann and Miller remark:

Professional learning is most powerful, long lasting, and sustainable when it occurs as a result of one's being a member of a group of colleagues who struggle together to plan for a given group of students, replacing the traditional isolation of teachers from one another. (1999, p. 62)

Many national and international reports throughout the last decade have highlighted the need for innovative approaches to teaching and learning e.g. *Charting our Education Future* (Government of Ireland, 1995), *Schooling for Tomorrow: What Schools for the Future?* (OECD, 2001). The TL21 project seeks to support schools move from a vision of fresh thinking about teaching and learning to implementation. The project team is keenly aware that such change is complex, sensitive to the insights of Fullan (2005), not least when he draws attention to the assertion by Black and Gregerson (2002, p.70) that

The clearer the new vision the easier it is for people to see all the specific ways in which they will be incompetent and look stupid. Many prefer to be competent at the (old) wrong thing than incompetent at the (new) things.

Furthermore, as Callan (2002) indicates ‘the systems of teacher development, curriculum development and school development are inextricably inter-linked’ and supporting such development is multi-faceted. Thus, implementing real change in teaching and learning practices in schools requires extensive professional conversations between teachers, between school leaders and between teachers and leaders. As a research and development project involving schools and a university education department, TL21 has been built on a strong belief in the transformative power of such conversations. For school leaders, the vision is of Principals and Deputies not only as facilitators of teachers seeking to improve their practice but of they themselves as actively engaged in leading the way. Through relevant and meaningful professional conversations with each other and with their staffs and students, school leaders can enhance their understanding of students’ and teachers’ learning needs. In so doing they are more likely to be better positioned to support innovative approaches, inside and outside classrooms, aimed at enriching young people’s learning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barth, R. (1990) *Improving schools from within; teachers, parents and principals can make the difference*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass,

Black, J. and Gregersen, H. *Leading Strategic Change*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Blase, J and Anderson, G. (1995) *The Micropolitics of Educational Leadership*, London: Cassell.

Callan, J. (2002) *School and Curriculum Development Initiative, Papers presented at two dissemination seminars, 2001*, Maynooth: Education Department, NUI Maynooth, available at www.nuim.ie/publications.

Coolahan, J (ed.) (1994) *Report of the National Education Convention*, Dublin: The National Education Convention Secretariat.

Cromien, S. (2000) *Department of Education and Science - Review of Department’s Operations, Systems and Staffing Needs*, Dublin: Department of Education and Science.

Department of Education (1993) *Transition Year Programmes, Guidelines for Schools*, Dublin, Authors.

Friere, P. (1970.) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London: Penguin.

Fullan, M. (2005) *Education in Motion, Leading in a Culture of Change*, UK and Ireland Workshop Tour, May 2005, www.michaelfullan.ca

Gleeson, J (2004) 'Cultural and Political Contexts of Irish Post-Primary Curriculum: Influences, Interests and Issues' in C. Sugrue (ed) *Curriculum and Ideology: Irish Experiences, International Perspectives*, Dublin: Liffey Press.

Government of Ireland (1995) *Charting Our Education Future*, White Paper on Education, Dublin: Stationery Office.

Government of Ireland (1998) *Education Act*, Dublin, Stationery Office.

Hargreaves, A (1994) *Changing Teachers, Changing Times*, London, Cassell.

Leader, D. and Boldt, S. (1994) *Principals and Principalship, A Study of Principals in Voluntary Secondary Schools*, Dublin: Marino Institute of Education.

Liebermann, A. and Miller, L. (1999) *Teachers – Transforming Their World and Their Work*, New York, Teachers' College Press.

Lortie, D. (1975) *School teacher: a Sociological study*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Macbeath, J. (1999) *Schools Must Speak for Themselves*, London, Routledge.

McDermott, K. (2004) 'To Stand Alone or to Stand Together? The Concept of Team in Second-Level Schools: Some Issues and Challenges', *Irish Educational Studies*, 23, 1, Dublin, Educational Studies Association of Ireland.

OECD (1991) *Reviews of National Education Policies for Education IRELAND*, Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development

OECD (2000) *Schooling for Tomorrow*, Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development

Schön, D. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

SDPI (2002) *Progress Report*, Dublin: School Development Planning Initiative, available at www.sdpi.ie

Senge, P.M. (1990) *The Fifth Discipline The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, London, Century Business.

Sergiovanni, T. (1996) *Leadership for the Schoolhouse*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.